

Forging Relationships

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Forging Relationships

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

For friends in the World, and friends in the Wired, and the intersection thereof.

TL;DR: Satsuki breaks her sword. Ryuko gets hot and sweaty in her forge.

Marooned on a planet a long way from Earth, the Commander of a frontier colony finds herself in need of a new weapon. How tiresome that the only person with the requisite skills to forge one is a rough and undisciplined swordsmith...

Notes

I normally associate Satsuki with swords and swordsmithing, but I couldn't resist building something around [this](#) wonderful rendition of swordsmith Ryuko by @gyosone.

This is a run-down sort of world.

It was in a bad neighborhood – the stellar equivalent of abandoned housing complexes, entropy kicking the doors in, breaking the windows, making everything unsafe, unstable. When the star of the adjacent system had begun its collapse and expiration it was like the uncontrolled demolition of a crumbling tower block; the ebb and flow of gravitational waves flooded this system, this world, shaking space-time like an earthquake. The ripples surged around the outer gas giants and then the central planets and their moons, like billowing clouds of brick dust, obscuring everything. You couldn't warp to a system like that; that would be like riding a dinghy in a hurricane, with the waves towering above you.

Two decades passed, and with no supplies and no contact with the rest of their culture, the colonists reverted to a strange kind of future medievalism. There was electricity, because the little reactor would probably still be running even after everything else had long gone to dust, but there wasn't much to do with it. The batteries of the six-wheeled rovers had aged and expired – becoming forgetful, like elderly relatives, unable to recall whether they'd been charged or not – so now the vehicles that, sure-footed, could have climbed mountains and bounced across the white sand of the beaches, were just relics that children played in, swinging from the doors and rattling the controls. Once a day the communication relay satellite would pass overhead, and then you could speak to someone beyond the horizon if you'd bartered time on one of the few sat-phones that still worked, and assuming your counterpart had done the same. There was one phone missing, somewhere up in the mountains, and once a week, or once a month, the ruling Council would call it and wait for the dead hand of history to acknowledge them. They waited for the death rattle of a familiar voice to announce its return, but the seconds always ticked down until the connection was lost and then the only response was whispering static.

The world was thinly populated, but the colonists weren't the planet's only inhabitants; in the deep oceans there was life of sorts, and simple stuff that flourished on the rocks, but nothing that could hold a conversation. On the fields near the little settlements that had grown up around the metal and plastic of the original landers, cattle lowed gently as they dined on the tough, sharp-leafed grasses. Rabbits flourished too, because they seemed to flourish everywhere. Adaptable, resilient, fecund – they were often more successful colonists than the explorers that brought them. Here, on this world, they were even *The Enemy*, because well-meaning children had once smashed open cages and the subsequent empire of the escapees had proved all too adroit at stealing the harvest and the fruits of others' labors.

And there was iron. There were other metals too, even gold and platinum that some set aside as heirlooms for their children for when the sub-light relief ships finally arrived, but aside from ornamentation and occasional delicate repairs, they were little used, and little sought after. Iron, though, iron – and the steels that the most skilled could draw from it – could make tools, and devices. It could make weapons, too, because tempers sometimes flared and long-ago disagreements had fractured the colony into separate village-states that were barely held in accord by fragile truces.

She had a way with metal, the scruffy girl with her forge on the edge of the village. She could curve it, and layer it, and make it sing. She made machines, and mechanisms, sometimes fine

work that she did with a magnifying glass, and sometimes thick supports for structures. She knew how and when to draw the red-hot metal from the melt, and she knew how and when to draw red to your cheeks, and for both of those skills she was always in demand. But mostly, for preference, she made swords; she put her heart and blood and sweat into blades.

They called her *Maître Matoi*; they'd been calling her that since even before her father had died, and the title of "Master Engineer" had formally been conferred. She wore the red badge of rank threaded into the hair on her forehead, and if you thought to take it off her, you'd have better pulled the tail of a wildcat. Her furnace was always running and even in the middle of winter the roof of her little shack was clear of snow, damp like fresh rainfall, and the warmth extended around it like a welcoming bubble.

The two horses stamped the ground impatiently, trampling the slush that surrounded the building. A single rider, buried deep in a thick coat against the solstice winds, struggled with twin sets of reins, and watched where the door was ajar.

Matoi turned the sword over and over on fingertips and then gave an exploratory swing. The blade was bent out of true, the edges notched and blunted. There was little to do but put it out of its misery. She pushed her hand up into her hair, and felt the little ribbon of cloth. She sighed.

"Whad'ya do with it?" What had been her finest creation was tossed into the corner scrap pile, ready to be smelted down and reborn. "Use it ta break rocks?"

Silence.

"If ya don't like my work, get the big guy ta make ya somethin'." She turned and relaxed back against her workbench, scrutinizing her customer with surprising intensity. "He's got a family. He needs..."

"I have no complaints about your work, Master Engineer."

The colonists – even those that had seceded from the original community – called her "The Lady". They'd had a name for her mother too, which hadn't been so complimentary, but there was a grudging respect for the daughter where previously there'd just been fear and reluctant obedience to the tyrannical parent.

"Mr. Gamagoori is a blacksmith, not a swordsmith. When I want a skillet he will have my custom."

She had the bearing of command – that was certainly something that had been passed down in her genes. Matoi had always found her stiff, formal: if not unfriendly, then certainly aloof. From those in the little outpost she received – with one or two notable exceptions – loyalty, but not love.

"Cook much for yourself, do ya, Commander Kiryuin?"

"*Acting* Commander Kiryuin, Maître Matoi."

It was just winter camouflage, a kind of cloak in whites and greys, but The Lady carried it off well, Matoi reflected; she almost made it regal. She was slim and tall, uncomfortably tall for the low roof of the forge in fact, and Matoi made a sly note to hang some more tools from the beams near the door; it was amusing to watch the Commander's rare indecision as she debated whether to dodge round them, or simply move them aside. Her long, straight, black hair was stark against her outfit, and would have given her away in the open snows, as obvious as coal atop a wedding cake, but there was something new to it, on this visit. Matoi was surprised to see the blue of her command position threaded into the hair at the front, either side of her face. It was the closest thing to ornamentation she'd ever seen on the young woman.

"Your boy wanna come in?" She gestured towards the door.

"Major Sanageyama is fine attending to our horses."

Matoi stopped slouching against the workbench, clapped her hands and rubbed them together a few times.

"Suit yerself. There's straw round the side if they get hungry. Or he does."

Jokes had never been The Lady's forte, at least as far as anyone knew. Matoi had sketchy memories of a little girl with straight, dark, hair – a version of the Commander in miniature – who'd smiled, and tumbled in the rough grasses with the other children. But that would be more than twenty years ago now, in the earliest days of the colony, before they'd been marooned. *Commander* Kiryuin knew about irony, and sarcasm, and probably the history of great comic literature, but not too much about the exuberant release of laughter, roaring until you were shaking and your legs were weak, tears streaming down your face. And perhaps not much about another sort of release that was so very similar.

One day I'll wring a little smile out of that frosty expression.

But that was a long-term project, something that would need more planning than even the most complex of machinery.

"Are the raw materials adequate?"

The molten metal in the furnace was blazing gold, radiating like a small sun. Matoi had stripped to just a vest and shorts, and a pair of smoked-glass goggles so she could assess the quality of the melt, but The Lady insisted on retaining her winter uniform and was content to let the freezing winds from the open door wrestle with the heat within.

"Yeah. It's good. Where'd ya get it? Nickel-iron meteorite?"

"Indeed. From up in the mountains."

"Huh... Up where ya mother disappeared?"

“ ... ”

“Strange the rest of ya made it back OK, that time.”

“ ... ”

“Think she’ll ever show up? Her body, that is?”

“ ... ”

“Not that I care. Hard-ass bitch. No offense.”

“None taken.”

Silence. Just the bubbling of metal and the preparation of tools.

“This is gonna take a while; few days, mebbe a week. Mako’ll get ya when I’m done.”

“She is in no condition to be travelling through the snow. Again.”

“Givin’ the rabbits a run for their money, eh?”

“I am content to return as necessary and supervise the work until its completion.”

“Ya sure? You’ll get hot ’n’ sweaty in that outfit, stayin’ here.”

“Afraid I’ll steal your secrets, Maître Matoï?”

That evening, when she lay in her bunk, Matoï would think that she’d almost seen a smile then – the most delicate turn of the corner of the mouth that might equally have been the shifting light and shadow from the furnace.

Yer stealin’ something already.

But she didn’t say that, though it did force a smile of her own instead.

“I don’t think even yer that good, *Acting* Commander Kiryuin.”

She rested against the door frame, at the boundary between the heat of the forge and the cold outside; she rested against smoke-blackened wood that was younger than she was, and watched alchemy take place.

“We never discussed payment for your services.”

The swordsmith turned smoothly, moving a red-hot ingot to the anvil and then rhythmic, metallic hammering made any further discussion impossible.

At these latitudes there was always snow in winter, a blanket that ranged from one or two inches up to great drifts into which even the tallest of them would have disappeared; in the months of long nights and low sun, it was impossible to venture out without layer upon layer of wool and leather. But inside the tropical little world of the forge, Matoi was content to work her magic in little more than shorts and a tight t-shirt, hair packed tight under a jaunty little cap. Commander Kiryuin could see muscles toned by hauling pig iron, skin tanned and weathered by the heat of the forge, and the faint vestiges of old cuts and burns; competence and complacency were clearly not entirely incompatible. There was elegance in the way she moved in the forge, elegance when outside Matoi seemed casual and careless, sometimes even clumsy. The metal obeyed her here, moving where she willed it, and it made her actions seem effortless.

Sparks in oranges and reds danced up and around as the hammer fell and rose in quick succession; the bar, now beginning to take shape, was quickly turned over and the process repeated. Then, equally quickly, it was returned to the hearth before its autumn colors had completely faded to black. Matoi carefully hung the hammer and tongs above her anvil.

“Nah. We didn’t, did we.” A few ideas of things to ask for were beginning to coalesce in her mind, as she watched the elegant figure in white stand to attention by the door. *Silver birch*, she thought. *Slender and pale*.

“A horse might have some utility for you...” the Commander advanced.

There weren’t many horses now. They’d always been a luxury, a little conceit brought by one of the more moneyed families, and they had thrived for a while, seeming to enjoy the level expanses of the grasslands where they could run at speed, and seemingly never draw closer to the horizon. Then a virus had swept through them, something their Earth-born genetics could offer no resistance to, and now only a handful of the hardiest remained. Now only the ruling councils of the individual outposts were knights.

Matoi gave an indecipherable little jiggle of the head, and the Commander tried again.

“If you had a horse, we could,” she corrected herself quickly, “that is, *you* could ride out well beyond the boundary of the outpost. The views are spectacular.”

“Ain’t gonna need a horse for that,” she made a little gesture towards the corner of the forge. Up against the wall was an aggressively-cowled motorbike, its engine partially disassembled. “Would have been my eighteenth birthday present from Dad. If he’d made it that far.”

“Maître Matoi ... we ran out of hydrocarbon fuels years ago.” Commander Kiryuin was surprised that something so obvious needed repeating.

Matoi gave a sly grin, and wandered to the far side of the forge, returning with a large, sealed drum that she rolled on the edge of its base.

“Got a plan for that.”

The contents were thick and glutinous, redolent with spices and scents of the kitchen. The Commander raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“You’re adapting it to run on bio-diesel.”

“Yeah – surprised ya never thought of that.”

Commander Kiryuin had thought of that, as had her mother before her. But fats and oils weren’t in great supply in the colony; there certainly wasn’t sufficient to make adapting the old rovers to diesel power a worthwhile investment. She’d never considered something as selfish as a motorbike, however.

“I’ll let ya ride pillion when I’m done, Commander.”

The visitor straightened herself up fully, like a tree flexing after the wind had died to a breeze.

“I do not believe that would be appropriate for someone of my rank.”

Matoi watched the Commander carefully, one canine catching wickedly at her bottom lip as she grinned. Then she slipped off her cap, tossing it onto her workbench and shook her hair into some semblance of its usual ragged mop.

“Gettin’ sweaty in here. Positively sticky.”

There was a bucket of clear, clean water beside the anvil; she grabbed it by its handle and swung it upwards, upending it over her head, and exhaling in a snort as the water streamed over her face. The water soaked into her shirt, making it tight across her breasts and stomach like a second skin. The fabric of her shorts turned dark, and the water ran in cold rivulets down her thighs and across her calves, pooling around her feet for a moment before the little gutter in the floor drew it gently away. She shook her head briefly, sending droplets flying in chaotic patterns, and then brushed her hair back out of her eyes with both hands.

“I won’t make ya ride side-saddle. Not unless ya want to.”

They’d progressed as far as finishing and polishing. While the early stages had been intricate and fascinating, this climax seemed nothing but interminable to the Commander: an endless procession of wheels and whetstones of different grades. The furnace was just a low glow now and the door had been closed; without the cold air behind her, the forge was claustrophobic and stuffy. She shifted awkwardly and the Master Engineer looked up, unexpectedly irritated.

“Just sit, will ya?” She stalled the blades smooth passage across the whetstone and placed it carefully on a pillow of leather. “It’s like yer lookin’ over my shoulder.”

The Lady gave her most disapproving look.

“I am still the ranking officer here, Master Engineer.”

Matoi slipped her hands into the pockets of her shorts, and gave another of her strangely intense stares.

“Regulations say that if it’s engineering, the Master Engineer has the final word, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“So *I* say that if you keep standing ya legs are gonna give way. Which makes it a structural matter. Which makes it my business. So sit.”

A chair, pale softwood and slender struts, was resting among a stack of other objects at the back of the forge. Matoi pulled it down carefully and pushed it across to the Commander; a brief hesitation and then she sat, gratefully relaxing against its support. For something with no cushions or padding, it was remarkably comfortable – the gently curved limbs let it flex against the arc of her back. Even the solid seat base seemed to perfectly fit the muscles of her thighs.

“Did you...?”

“Wood’s not usually my thing, but I made a set for the kids’ weddin’.” There was a little smile of pride. “That’s the prototype.”

Matoi pulled herself up onto her workbench and let her legs dangle freely, back and forth, like a child trying to drive a swing higher and higher.

“So... What does a Commander do when she’s not rulin’ us?”

“The Council rules by consensus, Maître Matoi.”

“But yer the one with the sword.”

“Someone has to be ultimately responsible.”

Silently, they sat for a while, slim legs pendulum-swinging the seconds into the past.

“No hobbies then. Not knitting or pressed flowers or nothin’.”

Forced impatience, that perhaps masked a confession that had been building for a while now.

“If you insist. I write.”

“Writin’ eh? Anythin’ to get the blood racin’?”

The Commander’s quarters were – unequivocally, definitively – no larger than those of anyone else in the outpost: half those of a married couple, and smaller still than the combination of modules and local materials allocated to those with children. She had a working computer, though, and a hard-link to the vast holographic array of information that had been sent with them: everything that might be needed on the new frontier. Each night, after she’d dealt with the business of her compatriots – settled the petty grievances, approved plans for harvests and livestock, officiated at weddings or said a few words at funerals – she

would transcribe a little of the knowledge it contained. She'd started at the things she thought most valuable – basic medicine, agriculture, care of the species they'd brought with them. And because a part of her knew that minds had to be nourished, as well as bodies, she'd started copying out chunks of literature: plays, poems and novels. She wrote them out carefully in ink whose permanence she'd engineered herself, hopeful they'd stand the test of the ages, but each time the screen on the little laptop hitched, or dissolved in static for a moment, her breath would catch, and her heart would thump until the text and images began to scroll smoothly again.

“Hardly. I’m transcribing information from the master database.”

“Yeah? Thought the core was meant to last forever.”

“It is. But the systems we have to read it have a very definite life-span.”

Matoi let her legs come to a halt, and she leant forward slightly, resting both palms on the reinforced edge of her workbench. The furnace plinked gently as thermal stresses sounded notes deep in its frame.

“Ya don’t think they’re comin’ for us, do ya?”

“...”

“When ya don’t say anythin’ I know it means yer thinkin’ the worst. That ain’t much of a disguise.”

“A stellar event like that... It generates a lot of electromagnetic interference, as well as the gravitational waves that confine us here. I doubt our signals had sufficient strength to reach anyone.”

“Guess we’d better get used to each other’s company then, Commander.”

Outside, the gentle drips of snowmelt from the warmth of the forge ticked time forwards once again. The Master Engineer picked up the blade and turned it carefully in the light; across the forge Commander Kiryuin squinted as dazzling highlights moved across it.

“Ya thinkin’ of naming it?”

“If it is sufficiently durable, I might.”

“Mebbe like King Arthur’s first sword, whatever that was...”

The Lady gave a little nod of approval.

“Drawn from a meteorite – the Sword in the Stone. Very apt.” She rested an elbow on the delicate arm-rest of her chair and watched Matoi keenly. “Many confuse it with Excalibur, but you’ve read Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* I see.”

“*Moat* what? Nah, but I like stories about swords.”

The Commander seemed momentarily crestfallen, causing Matoi to grin.

“...strange women lyin' in ponds distributin' swords is no basis for a system of government...”

“I’m sorry, Maître Matoi; I don’t follow you.”

“Not familiar with *all* the classics, then, Commander Kiryuin.”

Unfamiliar constellations were still visible in the early morning sky as the Commander and her aide arrived at the forge. It would be a clear, cold day, and the snow – still persisting as days gradually drew warmer – would be dazzling. The lights were off in the little building: the door closed, no smoke rising from the chimneys. No sound of machinery or metal being beaten into compliance. The door moved silently when The Lady pressed it, and she stepped quietly inside, careful that her cloak didn’t catch on the objects that were arranged like tightly-wound traps around the entrance.

The Master Engineer was sprawled in the wooden chair, back arched, arms dangling freely, head tilted uncomfortably far back and mouth wide open. Her snoring was almost bestial, the noise quite terrifying. The Commander approached softly and with one finger gently pushed Matoi’s mouth closed; the horrifying resonance ceased and eyes slowly opened.

“Master Engineer, were we not to continue today?”

Matoi yawned, somehow contriving to curve her spine even further, and then relaxed into a more normal position. She gestured vaguely towards the workbench, then interlocked her fingers and stretched her arms.

“Stayed up all night. It’s done.”

On a bed of fabric, the finished sword lay in its white scabbard.

“Nothing further, Maître Matoi?”

“What? Ya were expectin’ me to rise up out of the bath and give it to ya?”

Commander Kiryuin picked up her weapon and weighed it gently in one hand. It was surprisingly light.

“Scabbard’s carbon fiber. Don’t expect it to protect ya from injury though – not unless somethin’ hits it square on.”

The hilt was functional, unfussy, just as she’d requested, but when the Commander drew the blade slightly, matt black flowed from the white of the scabbard.

“Black...”

“Black goes with everythin’.” Matoi reached back and rubbed between her shoulder blades; then pushed a hand up the front of her shirt, scratching her breasts and letting the cool morning air play across the muscles of her stomach. “And ya look like the kind of woman who values stealthy over showy.”

The Lady nodded decisively – to Matoi, or perhaps to herself – and slid the blade sharply back into place.

“Excellent.”

She was almost through the door when she heard the creak of the chair, and found Matoi looking at her over its back, rocking gently and allowing the wood to flex.

“Ya better take care of this one, Commander. Or I’ll start chargin’ ya time and a half.”

“But we never did settle on a price – did we, Maître Matoi?”

The Commander closed the door carefully and the sharp white of winter illumination disappeared, replaced by the homely orange of the furnace hearth. For a few seconds Matoi could hear the rough crunch of snow underfoot before distance claimed the footsteps and they too disappeared. She stretched in the chair and closed her eyes.

“Nah, I never did get that smile off ya – did I, Kiryuin?”

Still, there was always the next time.

“Your orders, Commander?” Major Sanageyama held the reins of The Lady’s mount loosely as she pulled herself easily into the saddle.

“Back to the main compound, and then...”

She drew the sword again, enjoying its balance and how it formed a splinter of black against the background of untouched white snowdrift. Matoi had done good work, but...

“... and then weapons training. You can use the axe this time.”

The Major started for an instant, causing his horse to take a step backwards in proxy surprise.

“But, Commander, surely that might damage your new...”

“*I said*, you can use the axe this time.”

She turned her mount gently in the direction of the distant modules and the wooden buildings that surrounded them; smoke was rising as the community began to wake and prepare its morning meals. And when she was quite sure that she couldn’t be seen, either by her subordinate, or the owner of the little forge behind her, she allowed herself a deep breath, and a broad smile of satisfaction. Surely with mere weeks of intensive training she could be back

here again with the swordsmith's latest creation: for repairs certainly, if not a complete replacement.

Or so she hoped.

That is sooth, said Arthur; a gift I promised you, but I have forgotten the name of my sword that ye gave me. The name of it, said the lady, is Excalibur; that is as much to say as Cut-steel. Ye say well, said the king; ask what ye will and ye shall have it, an it lie in my power to give it.

- Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*

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